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AUTHOR(S):

Weiss, Meredith L.

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Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Colonial Malaya

DONNA J. AMOROSO

Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre; Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, 276p.

The recently concluded November 2014 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) General Assembly saw strident calls for other Malaysian communities to respect and honor the superior position of Malays and Islam in the country; for the unity of all Malays under UMNO, as their representative and protector; and for stronger safeguards to prevent slurs against Malaysia's revered sultans. From the cheers (or virtual sighs of resignation) with which the press and public met these appeals, one might think such discourse had always been the norm in Malaysia. Yet as Donna Amoroso's insightful study reveals, in fact, no part of the order UMNO leaders invoke is inevitable or even all that deep-rooted. Rather, the position of the sultans, the multiracial balance of population and power, and the relative prominence of UMNO itself reflect colonial patterns and anticolonial struggles more than age-old attributes of a unified Malay public.

Published, sadly, only posthumously, Amoroso's convincing and readable *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Colonial Malaya* takes us back to the early days of British colonialism, locating the roots of Malaysia's fundamentally conservative political order in patterns of indirect rule. Amoroso details the British elevation of what she terms "traditionalism," or "the conscious selection of appropriate ritual and idiom and the reconstruction of Malay culture along lines that were compatible with colonial rule" (p. 52). Traditionalism involved, on the one hand, the selective restoration of Malay culture and on the other, the creation of new norms and structures, to facilitate far-reaching changes. The result was both legitimation of British power and the aggrandizement of the Malay ruling class. Reified in the first key political transition, from Malay to British rule, then reaffirmed, with some adjustments, as colonial rule gave way to self-rule after World War II, the dominance of the Malay rulers over a presumed-feudalistic Malay populace has become iconic as a trope of Malay politics.

Amoroso begins where the conventional wisdom tends to assume the story starts: with depictions of Malays as "backwards" and "feudal," needing and expecting, as former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared in his path-forging *The Malay Dilemma*, special assistance and paternalistic leaders. Such a formulation was as useful for Mahathir as it was for the British before him—and just as much a construction. Aiming both to disguise the extent of their intervention and to stabilize Malay society, while also economizing by working through preexisting structures, the British propped up a set of Malay rulers as heads of homogenized, territorially-fixed Malay states. The rulers enjoyed pomp and regular payments; the British gained the appearance of ruling with, rather than just through, these figures of "traditional" local authority as they con-

solidated their control through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A stratum of aristocratic “chiefs,” meanwhile, served to link the British with the people, enabling the former to gauge popular reactions to reforms proposed, as well as to ensure some level of continuity in local administration.

British ideas about the nature and function of government—in particular, norms of “good government,” defined largely in terms of opening the state to, and developing the legal and physical infrastructure to support, capitalism—concatenated with their concern for the “traditional,” including an orientalist vision of exotic rites and a conveniently deferential mass public. That pairing required a fairly uniform set of states, with a fairly standardized, mutually exclusive authority structure, premised on control of demarcated territory rather than just of manpower. Yet the colonial authorities’ aim was economic, political, and demographic transformation, extending to the importation of thousands of laborers from China and India, while preserving a Malay society that was “overwhelmingly rural, politically docile and deferential to traditional aristocracies and royalties” (p. 4). This pattern of indirect rule rendered the British the apparent guardian of Malay interests, not least against increasing numbers of resident non-Malay workers—despite the fact that the British were largely responsible for the presence of those others within Malay lands.

As independence came to seem imminent, both the rulers and the class of aristocratic administrators needed to take over that mantle of protector. Malay elites’ complicity with Japanese occupying forces during World War II left the British dubious of their reliability; however, the latter’s Malayan Union plan for self-government would grant liberal citizenship to the non-Malays who had been their wartime allies and essentially strip the Malay rulers of their authority. While the story of UMNO’s founding in the crucible of opposition to the Malayan Union is part of party lore, Amoroso’s detailing of the specific machinations of the rulers and the aristocracy—allied for strategic purposes, but differently positioned—and the ways in which the late colonial era shaped their conservatism sheds new light on a foundational period in Malaysian history.

This process of entrenchment and preservation of a fixed set of largely compliant rulers, undergirded by what Chandra Muzaffar has labeled “administocrats” (civil servants in the colonial government, turned founders and leading lights of UMNO) served to equate *bangsa* (ethnic group) with *kebangsaan* (nationalism): these elites self-servingly framed survival of the Malays in their own land as intertwined with the identity and supremacy of the Malay ruling class. The British kept the Malay masses poorly educated, apart from an elite stratum educated in English starting early in the twentieth century at the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), just enough to serve as the lowest (yet still socially prestigious) echelon of government. This layer complemented that of the rulers at the top, without being equipped to pose a challenge to the British district officers in the middle. Malay rulers deemed ill-suited to the new order, the British bought off with pensions; others, while still regarded as inferior in character and capacity to their British overlords, received a regular allowance that “recognised a recipient’s position in society and guaranteed his

correct behaviour in political life,” thus serving “to foster active cooperation with British rule” (p. 42). In other words, the Malay ruling class lost real power with the advent of a colonial order, but gained status, wealth, and stability, celebrated through ceremonies and symbols. Meanwhile, the rulers’ perhaps unwitting role as “frontmen” for the colonial state (p. 97) effectively thwarted criticism of the British.

Even so, by the 1920s–30s, rising Malay literacy and a burgeoning press, urbanization and interaction across ethnic lines, increasingly active associational life, ties with counterparts in Indonesia and elsewhere, the disruption and dislocation of economic changes, and especially the Japanese interregnum threatened that balance. The very sense of the “Malay state” and “Malay people” crystallized during that late colonial period, in part through British action, and in part through the contest between UMNO and its more radical adversaries, especially in the Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM, Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya). Critical voices argued that the rulers should be less self-absorbed and docile, and should instead play a more active role in advancing Malay educational and economic progress, as well as working toward independence. Not least given British proscriptions, overtly “political” interventions were slow to develop prewar; part of the signal importance of the wartime occupation was the Japanese’s freeing and even training of nationalist interests. While the British Military Administration that followed restored key aspects of the status quo ante, the British failure to protect the Malays during the war, and of the Malay rulers, to do so after (amidst ethnic violence, communist insurgency, and unfavorable British schemes) lent grist to serious challenges, even as international norms and local plans left the British limited space for censorship or outright repression.

Ultimately, though, UMNO and the rulers together won out, with their assertion that *bangsa Melayu* required preservation of “tradition.” Conservatives propagated this message through a new style of mass politics, borrowed from the left and radical nationalists, and performed in media, rallies, speeches, and symbols. Maintenance of the ruling class trumped a more anticolonial nationalist response, as the “political struggle against the Malayan Union had transformed the Malay rulers into symbols of the new nation” (p. 164)—and peninsular Malaya into a unified nation, rather than a network of single states—no matter the rulers’ own initial complicity, in signing treaties with the British (later foresworn) to enable the Malayan Union’s enactment.

Amoroso’s account is well-supported and plausible. Still, the historical record leaves stronger evidence of British aspirations and actions than of their erstwhile subjects’ reasoning. She relies largely on British colonial sources and archives, albeit including letters from Malay rulers, reported conversations with the latter, and interviews. However, most evidence comes through the lens of “Anglo-Malay encounters” (p. 18), and as perceived or retold by the Anglo side of that conversation. The Malay masses here are largely mute followers—apart from a surge of mass political participation in the 1940s–50s, when they still acted seemingly en bloc. Furthermore, for the most part, Amoroso can only read the Malay rulers’ own reasoning from their actions or British reports

of the same. The account would be more convincing still were she able to include more first-hand discussions, at least from the rulers or aristocracy themselves. As it stands, the closest her retelling comes to such a perspective is probably in her discussion of early nationalist periodicals, UMNO proceedings, and more radical nationalist statements. I suspect the fault lies more in what sources are available than in Amoroso's sleuthing.

The publication of this long-awaited book—adapted from Amoroso's doctoral dissertation at Cornell University—contributes to our knowledge of Malay political and social history, and at a time when discussion of the Malay rulers and their stature is especially keen (notwithstanding how out-of-sync *lèse-majesté* laws would be with Malay history, as detailed here). More broadly, the work serves to illuminate the actual workings of indirect rule: how and why colonial authorities worked with, and altered, extant structures and patterns of authority, and the implications of those adaptations for anticolonial struggles and postcolonial development. As such, the work will be of interest to scholars not just of Malaysia, but of British and other European colonial projects more broadly—and it is written in such a way as to be accessible and useful to both a specialist and interested non-specialist audience. With this volume, Donna Amoroso adds to her already considerable academic legacy—including, of course, the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, which she was instrumental in founding.

Meredith L. Weiss

University at Albany, State University of New York

Living with Risk: Precarity and Bangkok's Urban Poor

TAMAKI ENDO

Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2014, 360p.

Given the paucity of books and articles written about the day-to-day living of the poor and the informal economy in Bangkok, this book is a welcome addition. It offers readers a solid understanding of the contemporary urban lower class, revealing the homogeneity and stratification within this class. In particular, it investigates their daily survival strategies and responses to various risks, focusing on issues related to residence and occupation. It also examines whether upward mobility occurs within this group and what upward mobility means for members of this group.

The structure of the book makes it obvious that this book is Endo's doctoral thesis. Consequently, the first chapter is her literature review. She discusses various useful topics related to the urban lower class, including the informal economy debate, frameworks to capture the internal structure of cities, the risk response processes of the urban lower class, the place and organization units of their strategy for survival, and the life course analysis method. While these topics them-